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ABSTRACT

The financial restraint of the last 3 years and the related rhetoric of accountability, productivity, cost effectiveness, and retrenchment have introduced new levels of trauma into the educational scene in British Columbia, exercising a particularly powerful impact on the community college sector. In a financial context that requires governments to spend less, education, and specifically community colleges, are selected as the targets of cutbacks for political reasons. Certain political or economic assumptions have dictated government priorities with respect to the college sector, including unconvincing and unsupported assumptions about declines in student demand, lack of public support, insufficient collegiate contributions to economic growth, and lack of institutional accountability. The effects of economic restraints on tuition and student aid, and the elimination of programs and courses will inevitably alter the student profile in favor of the more socioeconomically privileged. While larger classes, heavier teaching loads, crowded laboratories, and reduced support services may not of themselves be directly verifiable assaults on the quality of education, they have other demonstrably serious consequences for student access, instructor morale, and nontraditional educational opportunities. (EJV)

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Restraint and Reality:

- The Case for British Columbia's Colleges -

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Restraint and Reality:

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Introduction

The last three years have introduced new levels of trauma into the educational scene in British Columbia. Financial restraint and with it, the related rhetoric of accountability, productivity, cost effectiveness and retrenchment, has had a particularly powerful impact upon the college sector. Although never perceiving themselves as either the most privileged or protected elements within the educational spectrum, the college community now equates its vulnerability with the inevitable erosion of its most cherished ideals--quality instruction, accessibility to the less advantaged in society, and relevancy of its programs with respect to its regional constituencies.

This paper explores some important consequences of the "new reality" respecting non-university, post-secondary education. What are the political and fiscal implications of current government policies with regard to colleges? What are their consequences for quality, for access and for the future role of the college system? Answers to these questions are neither precise nor conclusive--their resolution demands a subtle combination of factual data with generous interpretation, an objectivity tempered with conviction, and an inevitable deference to intuition and idealism.

The Politics of Restraint

Before attempting to apply the consequences of restraint to the community college sector it is necessary to consider the factors which contributed to the present policy. While the government's alleged

"inability to pay" for selected programs is related to its financial balance sheet, the selection of those services which should be subject to restraint is essentially a political decision--no more, no less. As Dobell (1983) notes in his analysis, governments read public preferences, usually correctly, and act in accord. Whether parks, libraries or highways are closed, rather than instructional programs in colleges, is clearly a matter of political, rather than of economic judgment.

However, granted as a starting point that the current financial record requires that governments must "spend less", (notwithstanding the economic legitimacy of this conclusion raised by the B.C. Economic Policy Institute), why should education be selected as a target, or more specifically, why community colleges? The answer to this question of political preference surely must be based on any number of assumptions....

... Public sympathy for community colleges is minimal;

... Student support for community colleges has diminished;

... Colleges do not contribute to economic growth;

... Colleges have not demonstrated accountability;

... Colleges have overextended themselves and a reduction in services is warranted.

Undoubtedly there are other possible factors--the financial consequences of generous wage and salary agreements, for example,--which may justify government's attitude to education. But such settlements are common to the entire public sector, including health, transportation and mega-projects, and add little to an analysis of the problems specific to post-secondary education.

A useful point of departure might be to summarize the funding picture regarding British Columbia's colleges and institutes during the past three years, as represented in Table I.

TABLE I

Post-Secondary Non-university provincial operating Grants[2]

	Current dollars[3]	Constant dollars[1]
1982/83	$200.5 million	$211.9 million
1983/84	$198.5 million	$198.5 million
1984/85	$191.5 million	$185.0 million

Source: Ministry of Education: Post-secondary department

1 based upon July values, 1982=94.6, 1983 = 100, 1984 = 103.7

2 Excludes federal funding through Canadian Immigration and Employment.

3 Estimates

Several observations may be drawn from these figures, but it is sufficient to note, particularly in the light of inflation, that grants to the non-university sector seem not to be excessive. During the same period the federal grant to British Columbia for all post-secondary education (under Established Programs Funding and in current dollars), increased from $420.1 million in 1982/83 to $477.7 million in 1984/85. However, interpretation as to the designation of E.P.F., (which supports non-vocational programs in both colleges and universities), is a complicated argument from which consensus is virtually impossible.

With this background it is appropriate to examine the legitimacy of the a priori assumptions listed earlier in this paper.

The Student Demand Issue

Can we assume that the demand by students for a college education has diminished? As the following enrolment table indicates, the number of students seeking college credits in various programs, (excluding vocational, which are also in demand but funded differently), has increased steadily in recent years. There are obvious fluctuations in the figures, e.g., part-time enrolment has not generally increased, perhaps due to the eroding employment situation, while full-time statistics reflect a gradual rise. If students in the latter category are reacting to increasing costs of university education, this pattern might be expected to become more obvious.

Reduced funding for the K-12 sector has been explained by government as a legitimate response to declining enrolment. It might be argued, with similar logic, that the funding policy should be reversed in the case of the non-university sector. Such logic is not apparent.

Place Table 2 about here

Another way to considering the enrolment issue in relation to funding is through a study of participation rates. How does British Columbia compare to other provinces in college participation rates?

Unfortunately, it is difficult to make clear comparisons. Unlike universities, which share a certain homogeneity of purpose and program designs, colleges in Canada display diverse mandates, curriculum patterns and student profiles. The provinces most comparable with British Columbia, in a structural sense, are Alberta and Quebec. Rather than engaging in

lengthy discussion, the following table illustrates the point.

Place Table 3 about here

Evidently, no matter how one combines or dissects the data, British Columbia's record is less than impressive. One might even conclude that colleges in this province are not enrolling an inordinate number of students relative to the population. At the same time, it should be noted that Statistics Canada, at this stage, recognizes only "full time" enrollment--a deficiency in the data which may or may not obscure the picture!

Notwithstanding all of this, a student of Hegalian logic will note that contradictory conclusions may flow from a single assertion, i.e. high participation rates may invite both "good" and "bad" assessments. A government more concerned with quality than quantity may argue that increased participation is not a particularly desirable goal. Unfortunately, this conclusion does not clear the air! There is no evidence that B.C.'s colleges and universities are attracting the "best" high school graduates, in either case.

Finally, of additional significance to the matter of decentralized community college education is the wide divergence in participation rates between the rural and urban populations in this province. As Gallagher and Merner report (1981), enrolment rates for full-time first year college and university students are almost three times as high for Grade XII graduates in metropolitan communities as in rural regions of the province.

As colleges in British Columbia provide the only source of further

educational opportunity outside Vancouver and Victoria, the need to preserve their widely comprehensive presence, in the interests of socio-cultural equality alone, is worthy of spirited defence.

The Public Support Issue

Unfortunately, as with so many arguments regarding which social agencies enjoy broad public support, convincing evidence is also hard to gather. In the case of B.C.'s community colleges, however, there is one small, but interesting piece of information.

In January 1984 the Province reported upon a Goldfarb Poll, directed at citizens of greater Vancouver, which elicited some opinions relating to post-secondary education. One question read as follows..

"Should the government be giving more financial assistance to universities or to community colleges and trade schools?"

The results from the total population of respondents were ... Universities 8%, community colleges 49%, same 35% and "no opinion" 8%. For the under 25 respondents, the figures were, 18%, 53%, 23%, and 6%, respectively.

A second question asked...

"Which education is likely to lead to a job?"

Again, the answers for the entire sample were University 22%, Community Colleges 46%, same 27%, and "no opinion" 5%. For those under 25 the results were 37%, 41%, 20%, and 2% respectively.

Much could be said about the results of this poll (quite apart from its potential for devisiveness, which is largely counter-productive), but

they should be judged with caution. It appears that the level of current public concern over jobs had a great bearing upon reactions to the funding question.

While public perception is faulty regarding the most productive route to employment, as will be shown later in this paper, it cannot be argued that sympathy for community college education is at a low ebb. In fact, it might be concluded that Vancouver residents, at least, are cognizant about, sensitive to, and supportive of the arguments advanced by colleges for increased funding.

By way of a postscript, it should be noted that the first question in the poll, "Is a university education a benefit in today's society?", received an overwhelmingly positive (74%) response. In one sense, all elements of the post-secondary sector could be encouraged by the exercise. Emphasis upon job preparation, as applied to the university sector, is a consequence of limited insight into the prime purpose of a university education.

The Economic Contribution Issue

As Bowen argues succinctly in Investment in Learning (1977), higher education benefits both the individual and society. While economic returns are but one dimension of the benefits, they seem to be the most appropriate to examine in the "climate" west of the Rockies, where economic concerns have such a high profile.

Undoubtedly, one of the single most relevant statistics in this context is the matter of employability of college leavers ("graduates"

would not be the most appropriate term). A study completed by Dennison and others in 1983 examined, among other things, the job finding record of students from career-technical programs in B.C. colleges. At that time, their unemployment rate was 9.5%, a figure somewhat below the provincial average. But these were students from occupational programs--what of their counterparts from the academic, university equivalent courses? What kind of employment record do these students display?

A study by the same research team reported in 1982 that "transfer" students who had not "transferred" to university showed an involuntary unemployment rate of 5.8%, again well below the provincial average during that period of time. It is true, of course, that time changes statistical points in a rapidly changing economy and the second study is now ancient history. (It is indeed ironic that financial restraint has also dictated that no similar studies are presently underway in the province.)

Finally, as a popular but always informative source of data, the unemployment record with respect to educational level, as of September 1984, may be examined within this frame of reference:

Table 4

Level of Education Completed	Percent Unemployed: British Columbia	Percent Unemployed: Canada
0 - 8 years	17.3	11.8
High School	15.6	12.5
Some Post-secondary	12.1	10.3
Post-secondary Diploma	11.8	8.3
University Degree	10.3	6.8
Total	14.1	10.9

Source Statistics Canada: The Labour Force, Ottawa, Catalogue No. 71-001.

While being careful to avoid the conclusion, "cause-effect", rather than that of a simple relationship, the link between education and one condition of the economy is present, i.e. a healthy labour force. From this standpoint alone, college education is one of several positive factors in rejuvinating an admittedly fragile economy.

Bowen's analysis, referred to earlier, provides more than simply an economic testimony to values accruing from a government's investment in higher education. While economic considerations are real and legitimate bases for the recognizably large allocations of public taxes to the institutions of post-secondary education, it is instructive to ponder Bowen's more significant conclusion to his study..

> "First, the monetary returns from higher education alone are probably sufficient to offset all the costs. Second, the nonmonetary returns are several times as valuable as the monetary returns. And third, the total returns from higher education in all its aspects exceed the cost by several times. In short, the cumulative evidence leaves no doubt that American higher education is well worth what it costs."

The Accountability Issue

Are British Columbia's colleges providing a responsible account of their stewardship? In a recent study of Canada's colleges, the matter of institutional evaluation received particular attention. It was difficult not to conclude that colleges in this province have devoted an extraordinary proportion of their time and energy, relatively speaking, to performance assessment.

Partly because existing legislation demands formal accountability and partly because the Ministry has long demonstrated a commitment to planning—short, long, annual and five-year—B.C. colleges have, without exception, engaged in evaluations (internal and external), produced comprehensive plans, (with revised versions), and generally made their strengths and weaknesses known to all concerned.

The record of B.C. colleges with respect to reporting their current status, their hopes and aspirations for the future, and their ability to design strategies to meet financial restraint is virtually unequalled in

Canada. If such a process means accountability, it seems evident in this province!

Concluding Comments

This paper has argued several points. First, if a reduction in government spending is accepted as necessary, the targets selected for restraint will be determined almost entirely by political considerations. Education, in this special case community colleges, has borne a substantial thrust of the fiscal knife. It follows that certain assumptions, political or economic, have dictated government priorities with respect to the college sector and some of the more prominent assumptions have been explored, weighed and found unconvincing.

Colleges are public institutions and they are legitimate potential sources of recoverable revenue in a period of fiscal stress--but, by the same token, their case deserves a fair and reasonable hearing! The argument for colleges as instruments of economic recovery appears to be heard clearly in certain jurisdictions, Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, for example, where government deficits are neither recent nor inconsequential.

It seems appropriate to conclude on a more positive theme, which will introduce a certain aspect of quality, i.e., that British Columbia's colleges have long been able to document their role in providing access to further education for a cross section of the socio-economic strata traditionally excluded from the university sector. The impact of restraint, on tuition fees, on student aid, on the elimination of programs and

reductions in courses and upon opportunities for re-entry into job training, will inevitably alter the student profile in favor of the more socio-economically privileged. In the universities this consequence is serious and regrettable, in the colleges the impact will be relatively more disastrous, as these institutions provide the only reasonable form of access for students traditionally excluded from further education on geographic, academic, socio-cultural and psychological grounds.

As Guppy (1984) notes in a recent paper..

> "Whatever future directions democratization might take, the educational opportunities of B.C. students appear to be unequal. Exaggerating the policy relevance of such inequality is difficult. Occupational training, selection, and certification have increasingly become major functions of post-secondary institutions. If socially based disparities in opportunities for entrance to these institutions persist, then individual life chances, beyond schooling, must also remain unequal. To the extent that access to higher education is contingent upon social attributes unrelated to academic ability, such as region or class, then precious resources are wasted by excluding gifted people."

The relationship between restraint and quality, in the context of the community college, is tenuous at best. While larger classes, higher teaching loads, crowded laboratories, and reduced support services for students may not, of themselves, be directly verifiable assaults upon quality of education, they have other demonstrably serious consequences.

One is the overall discouragement of students, whose frustrations over reduced contact with instructors, lack of opportunity to raise concerns in over-populated classes, and inability to enrol in courses which meet their needs and expectations leads them to reject the college milieu and content themselves with an unproductive existence in the ranks of the unemployed.

But of even greater significance, perhaps, is the effect of long-term restraint upon formally creative and energetic college instructors. This consequence is reflected in states of tension, of insecurity, and of erosion of morale sufficient to drain these teachers of any real energy for their task. Fear, rooted in the lack of predictability regarding the future, and stemming from mistrust of the motives and agendas of government, administration and their colleagues, contains real potential for permanent harm to a once innovative and forward looking educational enterprise.

The colleges of British Columbia have offered new vistas of opportunity for a segment of the population traditionally excluded from further education. While credit programs in academic and occupational areas have been in constant demand, these are only one dimension to the services which colleges provide. Many college students have sought different experiences through non-credit programs which provide new ways of coping with life in a complex society or generate the confidence needed to face an uncertain future. Many colleges have provided these services through decentralized facilities in small communities, an important factor in accessibility.

It is these last activities which are most vulnerable during periods of restraint. Eventually the individuals most hurt are those which need the college services most. In this other aspect of quality, quality of life in a society where so much human alienation occurs, the effects of budget reductions are equally apparent.

The quality of education in community colleges may be measured in a variety of ways--but all suffer, in a greater or lesser degree, from the impact of restraint!

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Table 2

Head Count Enrolments, Colleges and Institutes

	79/80	80/81	81/82	82/83	83/84
Academic					
Full Time	6880	7389	7365	8722	8997
Part Time	11558	11920	11228	12046	11167
Career Technical					
Full Time	9588	9974	10457	11343	12213
Part Time	15700	17810	16670	15427	14746
College Preparatory					
Full Time	604	818	834	832	988
Part Time	2244	2372	2163	2350	3745
Grand Total	46574	50283	48717	50720	51856

Source: Ministry of Education: Post-Secondary Department

Table 3

Full time enrolment...

(a) in colleges, as a percentage of the 18-21 age group		(b) in post-secondary education, as a percentage of the 18-24 age group		(c) in universities, as a percentage of the 18-21 age group	
B.C.	10.2	B.C.	15.5	B.C.	14.7
Alberta	10.5	Alberta	15.8	Alberta	16.5
Quebec	29.3	Quebec	27.6	Quebec	16.1
Ontario	13.5	Ontario	23.3	Ontario	23.5
Canada	15.4	Canada	21.7	Canada	19.7

Source:

Statistics Canada. Education in Canada: A Statistical Review for 1982-83. Ottawa, Catalogue No. 81-229.

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